

The Bureaucrat's Ten Commandments

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THE AVERAGE newspaper reader in the 1950s must have asked: Why don't we take some of our troops out of Europe? Ike himself said we didn't need them all there. Later, in 1961, after the tragicomic Bay of Pigs invasion, the reader asked: How did President Kennedy ever decide to do such a damn fool thing? Or later, about Vietnam: Why does President Johnson keep on bombing North Vietnam when the bombing prevents negotiations and doesn't get Hanoi to stop the fighting?

Sometimes the answer to these questions is simple. It can be attributed squarely to the President. He thinks it's right. Or he believes he has no choice. As often as not, though, the answer lies elsewhere—in the special interests and procedures of the bureaucracy and the convictions of the bureaucrats.

If you look at foreign policy as a largely rational process of gathering information, setting the alternatives, defining the national interest and making decisions, then much of what the President does will not make sense. But if you look at foreign policy as bureaucrats pursuing organizational, personal and domestic political interests, as well as their own beliefs about what is right, you can explain much of the inexplicable.

In pursuing these interests and beliefs, bureaucrats (and that means everyone from Cabinet officials to political appointees to career civil servants) usually follow their own version of the Ten Commandments:

1. DON'T DISCUSS domestic politics on issues involving war and peace.

On May 11, 1948, President Truman held a meeting in the White House to discuss recognition of the new state of Israel. Secretary of State George Marshall and Under Secretary Robert Lovett spoke first. They were against it. It would unnecessarily alienate 40 million Arabs. Truman next asked Clark Clifford then special counsel, to the President, to speak. Arguing for the moral element of U.S. policy and the need to contain communism in the Middle East, Clifford favored recognition. As related by Dan Kurzman in "Genesis 1948," Marshall exploded: "Mr. President, this is not a matter to be determined on the basis of politics.

Unless politics were involved, Mr. Clifford would not even be at this conference. This is a serious matter of foreign policy determination . . ." Clifford remained at the meeting and, after some hesitation, the United States recognized Israel.

The moral merits of U.S. support of Israel notwithstanding, no one doubts Jewish influence on Washington's policy toward the Middle East. And yet, years later, in their memoirs, both Truman and Dean Acheson denied at great length that the decision to recognize Israel was in any way affected by U.S. domestic politics.

A powerful myth is at work here. It holds that national security is too important, too sacred, to be tainted by crass domestic political considerations. It is a matter of lives and the safety of the nation. Votes and influence at home should count for nothing. Right? Wrong. National security and domestic reactions are inseparable. What could be clearer than the fact that President Nixon's Vietnam troop reductions are geared more to American public opinion than to the readiness of the Saigon forces to defend themselves? Yet the myth makes it bad form for government officials to talk about domestic politics (except to friends and to reporters off the record) or even to write about politics later in their memoirs.

And what is bad form on the inside would be politically disastrous if it were leaked to the outside. Imagine the press getting hold of a secret government document that said: "President Nixon has decided to visit China to capture the peace issue for the '72 elections. He does not intend or expect anything of substance to be achieved by his trip—except to scare the Russians a little." Few things are more serious than the charge of playing politics with security.

Nevertheless, the President pays a price for the silence imposed by the myth. One cost is that the President's assumption about what public opinion will and will not support are never questioned. No official, for example, ever dared to write a scenario for President Johnson showing him how to forestall the right-wing McCarthyite charge that he had ordered the pull out of Vietnam. Another cost is that bureaucrats, in their ignorance of presidential views, will use their own no-

tions of domestic politics to screen information from the President or to eliminate options from his consideration.

2. SAY what will convince, not what you believe.

In the early months of the Kennedy administration, CIA officials responsible for covert operations faced a difficult challenge. President Eisenhower had permitted them to begin training a group of Cuban refugees for an American-supported invasion of Castro's Cuba. In order to carry out the plan, they then had to win approval from a skeptical new President whose entourage included some "liberals" likely to oppose it.

The CIA director, Allen Dulles, and his assistant, Richard Bissell, both veteran bureaucrats, moved effectively to isolate the opposition. By highlighting the extreme sensitivity of the operation, they persuaded Kennedy to exclude from deliberations most of the experts in State and the CIA itself, and many of the Kennedy men in the White House. They reduced the effectiveness of others by refusing to leave any papers behind to be analyzed; they swept in, presented their case and swept out, taking everything with them.

But there remained the problem of the skeptical President. Kennedy

feared that if the operation was a complete failure he would look very bad. Dulles and Bissell assured him that complete failure was impossible. If the invasion force could not establish a beachhead, the refugees, well-trained in guerrilla warfare, would head for the nearby mountains. The assurances were persuasive, the only difficulty being that they were false. Less than a third of the force had had any guerrilla training; the nearby mountains were separated from the landing beach by an almost impenetrable swamp; and none of the invasion leaders was instructed to head for the hills if the invasion failed (the CIA had promised them American intervention).